

The Christen O'Donnell Equestrian Helmet Act

To prevent future horse-related deaths by requiring minimum safety standards on equestrian helmets

Who was Christen O'Donnell?

On August 11, 1998, a young girl named Christen O'Donnell from Darien, Connecticut, was thrown from her horse while riding. Even though her horse was only at a walk and Christen was wearing a hunt cap, she sustained a traumatic brain injury as a result of the fall, was rushed to the hospital, and died the next day.

At the time of her accident, Christen was wearing the traditional velvet hunt cap that had been the norm for riders for decades. Many horseback riders value the aesthetic of the traditional hunt cap, but this accessory is simply a piece of apparel which does not meet any sort of minimum safety standards and provides no real protection from head injuries. **Christen's family could not see the difference between the aesthetic hunt cap and the ASTM/SEI certified helmets; can you?**



As you can see, the purely-aesthetic traditional hunt cap is nearly identical to the helmet that can actually protect riders. The good news is that, after this bill becomes law, **equestrians will be able to remain safe while riding without losing the aesthetic of the hunt cap.** It's a win-win.

After hearing Christen's story, Charles Owen, a leading manufacturer of equestrian helmets and hunt caps, agreed to stop manufacturing velvet hunt caps. However, these helmet look-alikes continue to be sold on the web, at tag sales, at horse shows, and in stores across America, right beside the real helmets. The Christen O'Donnell Equestrian Helmet Act ensures riders of all experience levels are properly protected by requiring all equestrian helmets to meet the same kinds of safety standards we already require for bike helmets.

Summary of the Bill

- Directs the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) to establish a standard for equestrian helmets based on the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) safety standards.
- Requires all helmets manufactured and sold in the United States to meet the ASTM safety standard nine months after the law goes into effect, and the CPSC standard once it is established.
- Subjects any manufacturer found to be in violation of the new standards to the penalties established by the Consumer Product Safety Act and Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act, including a maximum fine of up to \$100,000 if a death has not occurred, up to \$500,000 if a death has occurred, and imprisonment of up to one year.

Statistics

- Brain injuries are a major public health concern, with two million head injuries occurring in the United States every year. Horseback riding causes 11.7% of sports-related traumatic brain injuries, which is the largest percentage of any recreational sport.
- A motorcyclist can expect one serious accident every 5,000 riding hours, while an equestrian can expect one every 350 riding hours.
- Traumatic brain injuries are a greater risk in horseback riding than in any other sport, resulting in eight deaths per year in the world of football, but 60 in the equestrian world.
- 68,000 people visited the emergency room in 2012 as a result of horse riding related injuries. Head injuries accounted for 15,000, or about 22%, of these visits and are the number one reason for hospital admissions and the leading cause of death.
- Between 2001 and 2009, children under 19 made 3,638 emergency room visits per year for traumatic brain injuries resulting from horseback riding accidents.
- Over 100 deaths per year are estimated to result from equestrian related activities. According to the Equestrian Medical Safety Association (EMSA), head injuries account for three of every five of these deaths.
- Racing organizations require helmets, and as a result jockeys now sustain fewer head injuries than pleasure riders. The U.S. Pony Clubs lowered head injury rates 29 percent with mandatory helmet use.
- Properly fitted ASTM/SEI certified helmets can reduce head injury-related deaths by 70 to 80 percent. **In short, ASTM/SEI certified helmets save lives.**

Organizations Supporting the Bill

- U.S. Pony Clubs
- The Equestrian Medical Safety Association, a nonprofit organization dedicated to preventing horseback riding injuries
- Riders4Helmets, an online campaign that boasts nearly 17,000 supporters on Facebook
- Charles Owen, a leading manufacturer of certified equestrian helmets which provides helmets for many professional riders, including Olympic medalists Bezie Madden and Laura Kraut
- Safe Kids Worldwide, an organization dedicated to preventing childhood injuries
- The Brain Trauma Foundation
- Chronicle of the Horse, an American weekly equestrian magazine